

# Bilinguals find it easier to learn a third language

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The study also found that Russian speakers had a better grasp of Hebrew than Hebrew speakers themselves. "Learning a mother tongue and preserving it does not compromise the ability to learn an additional language. The opposite is true: Knowing Russian enforces Hebrew fluency and command of both languages increases skills in English," the researchers noted.

Bilinguals find it easier to learn a third language, as they gain a better aptitude for languages, a new study from the University of Haifa reveals.

Prof. Salim Abu-Rabia and Ekaterina Sanitsky of the Department of [Special Education](#), who conducted the study, set out to examine what benefits bilingualism might have in the process of learning a third language. They hypothesized that students who know two languages would have an easier time gaining command of a third language than would students who are fluent in only one language.

For this study, two groups of 6th grade students in Israel were chosen to represent a sample of students studying English as a foreign language. The first group comprised 40 students, immigrants from the FSU whose [mother tongue](#) is Russian and who speak fluent Hebrew as a [second language](#). The second group comprised 42 native Hebrew-speaking students with no fluency in another language, besides the English being studied in school as a foreign language.

Each participant took part in two meetings: a group meeting and an

individual meeting. At the group meeting, the participants were given tests that assessed reading strategy and familiarity with the orthography of each language – Hebrew, English and Russian for the Russian speakers, and were asked to fill out personal questionnaires. At the individual student meetings, the researchers gave the Hebrew-only speakers a test in Hebrew and English, and the same tests with Russian added were given to those who were Russian speakers.

After comparing and merging the results of these tests, the researchers were able to conclude that those students whose mother tongue was Russian demonstrated higher proficiency not only in the new language, English, but also in Hebrew. They found that the total average between the tests of the two groups was above 13% in the Russian-speakers' favor. Some of the specific tests showed particularly wide gaps in command of English, the Russian speakers achieving the higher scores: in writing skills, there was a 20% gap between the scores; in orthographic ability, the gap reached up to 22%; and in morphology it soared as high as 35%. In the intelligence test (the Raven Progressive Matrices test), the gap was over 7% on the side of the Russian speakers. According to the researchers, these results show that the more languages a person learns, the higher his or her intelligence will be.

This team of scholars also noted that the fact that the Russian speakers had better Hebrew skills than the Hebrew speakers themselves indicates that acquiring a mother tongue and preserving that language in a bilingual environment does not come at the expense of learning a second language – Hebrew in this case. In fact, the opposite is true: fluency and skills in one language assist in the language acquisition of a second language, and possessing skills in two languages can boost the learning process of a third language.

"Gaining command of a number of languages improves proficiency in native languages," Prof. Abu-Rabia explained. "This is because

languages reinforce one another, and provide tools to strengthen phonologic, morphologic and syntactic skills. These skills provide the necessary basis for learning to read. Our study has also shown that applying language skills from one language to another is a critical cognitive function that makes it easier for an individual to go through the learning process successfully. Hence, it is clear that tri-lingual education would be most successful when started at a young age and when it is provided with highly structured and substantive practice," he concluded.

Provided by University of Haifa

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